



NEWS RELEASE

OFFICE OF THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY
WESTERN DISTRICT OF MISSOURI

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DEFENDANT PLEADS GUILTY IN JOPLIN CRACK COCAINE CONSPIRACY

SPRINGFIELD, Mo. – Todd P. Graves, United States Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, announced that a defendant pleaded guilty today to his role in a conspiracy to distribute crack cocaine in the Joplin, Mo., area.

Ernesto V. Bell, also known as “Stone,” 27, who is currently in federal custody, pleaded guilty before Magistrate Judge James C. England this morning to a conspiracy to distribute 50 grams or more of crack cocaine.

By pleading guilty, Graves said, **Bell** admitted that he engaged in the distribution of crack cocaine in the Joplin, Mo., area from August 1999 through February 29, 2000.

On February 2, 2000, **Bell** sold approximately one gram of crack cocaine to a confidential informant in two separate transactions, Graves said. On February 29, 2000, after a vehicle chase involving law enforcement officers, **Bell** was arrested and found in possession of a quantity of crack cocaine, money and a loaded Steyr 9mm handgun.

According to Graves, the total amount of crack cocaine attributable to **Bell** in the course of the conspiracy under today’s plea agreement is at least 150 grams but less than 500 grams.

As a result of **Bell’s** plea agreement, he could be subject to a sentence ranging from a minimum of 10 years in prison without parole, up to life imprisonment, plus a fine up to \$4 million. The sentence will be determined according to the United States Sentencing Guidelines. A sentencing hearing will be scheduled sometime after the completion of a presentence investigation by the U.S. Probation Office.

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney David P. Rush. It was investigated by the Joplin Police Department, the Jasper County Drug Task Force, the United States Drug Enforcement Administration, the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms, the Joplin Area Major Case Squad, the Tulsa Police Department, the Missouri State Highway Patrol, the Jasper County Sheriff's Department, the Newton County Sheriff's Department, COMET (the Combined Ozarks Multi-jurisdictional Enforcement Team), and the Springfield Police Department.

This news release, as well as additional information about the office of the United States Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, is available on-line at
www.usdoj.gov/usao/mow